

1. Report Security Classification: UNCLASSIFIED			
2. Security Classification Authority:			
3. Declassification/Downgrading Schedule:			
4. Distribution/Availability of Report: DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT A: APPROVED FOR PUBLIC RELEASE; DISTRIBUTION IS UNLIMITED.			
5. Name of Performing Organization: JOINT MILITARY OPERATIONS DEPARTMENT			
6. Office Symbol: C		7. Address: NAVAL WAR COLLEGE 686 CUSHING ROAD NEWPORT, RI 02841-1207	
8. Title (Include Security Classification): Revolution in the Philippines: Comparing the Communist and Muslim Insurgencies (Unclassified)			
9. Personal Authors: Christopher E. Tiernan			
10. Type of Report: FINAL		11. Date of Report: 4 February 2002	
12. Page Count: 21 12A Paper Advisor (if any): Professor Waghelstein			
13. Supplementary Notation: A paper submitted to the Faculty of the NWC in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the JMO Department. The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the NWC or the Department of the Navy.			
14. Ten key words that relate to your paper: Philippines, insurgency, space, force, time, communist, Muslim, Moro, guerillas, terrorism			
15. Abstract: This paper focuses on the similarities and differences in two of the Philippines' ongoing insurgencies. Each one has its own root causes and ideologies. One is a holdover of the twentieth century communist revolutions while the other is an ethno-religiously based revolution that may be more common in the early twenty-first century. On the surface these conflicts seem different. However, when analyzed in relation to the factors of operational warfare, it appears they are more alike than different. Use of the Maoist model, internal divisions in the movements, terror tactics, and desire for economic reform are all characteristics common to both insurgencies. Although every insurgency is unique, and no real template exists that applies to all, military planners may still be able to take some lessons learned from past insurgencies and apply them to counterinsurgency efforts in the future.			
16. Distribution / Availability of Abstract:	Unclassified X	Same As Rpt	DTIC Users
17. Abstract Security Classification: UNCLASSIFIED			
18. Name of Responsible Individual: CHAIRMAN, JOINT MILITARY OPERATIONS DEPARTMENT			
19. Telephone: 841-6461		20. Office Symbol: C	

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

Security Classification of This Page Unclassified

NAVAL WAR COLLEGE
Newport, RI

**Revolution in the Philippines:
Comparing the Communist and Muslim Insurgencies**

By

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Major USMC

A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College, the Department of the Navy, or the United States Marine Corps.

Signature:_____

4 February 2002

Faculty Advisor: Professor John D. Waghelstein

Report Documentation Page		
Report Date 04 Feb 2002	Report Type N/A	Dates Covered (from... to) -
Title and Subtitle Revolution in the Philippines: Comparing the Communist and Muslim Insurgencies	Contract Number	
	Grant Number	
	Program Element Number	
Author(s)	Project Number	
	Task Number	
	Work Unit Number	
Performing Organization Name(s) and Address(es) Joint Military Operations Department Naval War College 686 Cushing Road Newport, RI 02841-1207	Performing Organization Report Number	
Sponsoring/Monitoring Agency Name(s) and Address(es)	Sponsor/Monitor's Acronym(s)	
	Sponsor/Monitor's Report Number(s)	
Distribution/Availability Statement Approved for public release, distribution unlimited		
Supplementary Notes The original document contains color images.		
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Subject Terms		
Report Classification unclassified	Classification of this page unclassified	
Classification of Abstract unclassified	Limitation of Abstract UU	

Number of Pages

23

Introduction

The Republic of the Philippines currently faces insurgent threats from both communist and Muslim factions within its borders. These insurgencies have been festering for many years, but may, in a “microcosmic” sense, represent the bridge between the classic Maoist/Communist "people's war" of the twentieth century and the religious-based Islamic independence movements that may be more common in the dawn of the twenty-first century. Using the operational factors of space, force, and time as a framework, an analysis of two of the ongoing insurgencies in the Philippines reveals that characteristics of the traditional communist-based insurgency are similar to the characteristics of the religious and ethnic-based insurgency.

This analysis must be prefaced with the idea that there is no template for success when fighting against an insurgency. Essentially, no two insurgencies are exactly alike. This analysis will draw out some of the common characteristics of these two insurgencies and how they relate to the operational factors. Understanding some of these characteristics may assist military planners in conducting counterinsurgency operations in the future.

Definitions of Space Force, and Time

If all military conflicts can be broken down into the primary factors of space, force, and time, then using these factors to evaluate the communist and Muslim insurgencies in the Philippines may provide us some insight into the similarities and differences of these two conflicts. Therefore, my argument will first present the similar characteristics of the two insurgencies. Subsequently, I will present some of the

characteristics that differentiate the two insurgencies. In each case I will explain how these characteristics effect, or are influenced by, the factors of space, time, and force. By the conclusion of this analysis I hope to prove that these insurgencies are more similar than different.

Rather than restating definitions of the operational factors, and for the sake of brevity, Figure 1 provides the required definitions.

Space: Physical space encompasses land, sea, and airspace, including outer space, with all their features, which influence employment and effectiveness of land, sea, and air forces. In addition, legal, political, ethnic, or religious conditions considerably influence the use of physical space.

Time: Time lost can never be recovered, while space lost can be regained. Any military action requires a certain amount of time to plan, prepare, conduct, and sustain. For the attacker, time is required to consolidate his gains of space. This includes the time required to secure control of newly acquired areas and to militarily organize the space.

Force: Force refers to military sources of power. This can include such things as number of personnel, weapons and equipment, mobility, firepower, logistics, leadership, training, combat readiness, small-unit cohesion, morale, and discipline.

Figure 1: Operational Factors¹

Background: The Communists

Today's Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) has its roots in the Huk Rebellion of the early 1950's. The Huks were successors to the Hukbalahaps, or the People's Anti-Japanese Army, Filipino freedom fighters of World War II. After Philippine independence was granted in 1946, the Huks, seen as communists, were not recognized as a legitimate political party and were blocked from the elective process.² Thereafter, the Huks turned their efforts against the new American-sponsored government of the Philippines. The Huks, operating primarily in the Luzon area (see

figure 2 for map), attempted to drive American influence out of the Philippines and establish a Socialist government for the “archipelagic” nation. The insurgency eventually failed in 1954 due to effective counter-insurgent tactics and socio-economic reforms of the Philippine government.³

The CPP was founded in 1968 by Jose Maria Sison. The New People's Army (NPA) became the CPP's military arm in its struggle against the Philippine government. Sison, a professor at the University of the Philippines, was a student of Mao Tse Tung's revolutionary teachings and writings. Sison went so far as to claim that the CPP was officially founded on December 26, 1968, Mao's 75th birthday.⁴ Although Sison and his military chief, Commander Dante, had built the CPP and NPA from the remnants of the old Huk movement in Luzon, they were able to spread the revolution to the Visayas (central islands) and Mindanao areas of the Philippines.⁵ Figures vary on the size and strength of the NPA over the years. Author Donald Kirk claimed that in 1976 the NPA had 10,000 members.⁶ Colonel Orlando Ambrocio, in published research from the U.S. Army War College, stated that in 1988 the NPA was 26,000 members strong and was conducting guerilla operations all over the Philippine archipelago.⁷

Background: The Muslims

On Mindanao and the smaller islands of the south Philippines there is a large Muslim population that pre-dates Spanish colonization. These people refer to themselves as Moros, a translation of the word “Moors” which was used by the Spanish to describe their Muslim enemies of the middle ages.⁸ In analyzing the Moro-Christian conflict in the Philippines one must understand that this struggle contains strains of politics and

economics as well as ethnicity. The Moros have traditionally been a poorer segment of Philippine society and poverty is pervasive in their communities.⁹ Generally, the Moros advocate the creation of an independent Muslim state in the southern Philippines. Nur Misuari founded the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) in 1969.¹⁰ The MNLF was dedicated to liberating the Moro people from their Philippine-Christian oppressors, and sought an independent Muslim-led nation of Mindanao. Years of fighting, diplomacy, and more fighting led to the Tripoli Agreement of 1976. This agreement, and a subsequent 1996 summit in Jakarta, provided a certain level of autonomy for some Muslim provinces. These provinces are now united under a single governor and are part of the organization known as the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). The provinces are not completely independent and are still subordinate to the Philippine government in Manila.¹¹ ARMM is not supported by all Muslim independence groups. The issue of Muslim splinter groups will be discussed in greater detail later in this paper.

Similarity: The Maoist Model

An insurgent force will rarely, in its infant stages, be able to project enough combat power to defeat the standing army of an established government. The insurgents will have to gradually gain space in order to build enough support and combat power to defeat their enemy. The NPA in its struggle against the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) has attempted to wage a people's war in the countryside. The Maoist model for this type of insurgency encourages the establishment of bases of support in the countryside from which to recruit new members over time and project combat power. In this case combat power comes in the form of guerilla attacks. This strategy is difficult to combat with conventional tactics and firepower. The counterinsurgent force may be able

to drive the communists out of an area for a period of time, but unless the government can change the feelings of the local population or physically occupy the area with ground troops, the guerillas will regenerate after the counterinsurgents depart. Luis Taruc, former leader of the Huk movement, admitted in a personal interview conducted at the Army Command and Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas that the primary reason for the Huk's defeat in 1954 was President Magsaysay's land reform program. This program and other reforms provided a better quality of life for the masses and quelled their disgruntlement with the government. Magsaysay's program coupled with an effective small-unit counterinsurgency force created a difficult environment for the communist guerillas. Ultimately, the Huk's recruiting base was undercut in Northern Luzon and the movement collapsed.¹²

The Islamic insurgents have adopted a similar strategy to that of the Huks. They have attempted to build bases of support among the Muslim population of the southern Philippine islands. Much like the NPA, the Moro guerillas have attempted to use these bases of support to conduct guerilla operations against government troops and police organizations that try to suppress them. The overriding concept being that if the Islamic rebels can rally enough support among the population and make it difficult enough for the AFP, the Philippine government might eventually find it too costly (and dangerous) to maintain control of the Islamic provinces in the south.¹³ It is estimated that in 2000 the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), an offshoot of the MNLF, controlled up to ten percent of Mindanao.¹⁴ Larry Cable referred to this type of conflict as a “defensive insurgency.” More specifically defined, it occurs when a sub-group in a state, in this case a religious sub-group, seeks autonomy or independence for a specific region of the



Figure 2: Map Of the Philippines¹⁵

state.¹⁶ Steven Metz, in an article published in Parameters in 1995, claimed that this form of insurgency is closest to the traditional “people’s war,” as the rebels will place great stock in the establishment of “liberated zones.” Metz went on to explain that the distinct difference between the two insurgencies is while the Maoist model bases mobilization and support on “political ties,” the defensive insurgency uses “primal ties.”¹⁷ Insurgent ideology will be addressed later in this analysis.

For both the communists and the Moros, the use of the Maoist model for insurgency enables them to trade space for time with the intent of building greater force capability. Small gains of space allow the smaller insurgent force more time to build up forces. Avoiding large-scale conventional engagements with the AFP provides for the survival of the guerillas and greater opportunity to spread the cause to other parts of the contested space. For the NPA, the contested space is the entire Philippine nation and for the Moro guerillas, it is the predominantly Muslim areas of the south.

Similarity: Internal Fissures

Both the communists and Muslims have suffered internal conflicts within their movements. These conflicts, in both cases, led to splinter groups that have carried on the cause in their own ways. The CPP began to fracture in the early 1990’s. In 1976 the founder of the CPP, Jose Maria Sison, and his military chief, Commander Dante, were arrested by the Ferdinand Marcos regime for terrorist actions committed against the Philippine government. The two men were eventually released from prison in 1986 by order of Philippine President Corazon Aquino. After their release Sison went into self-

imposed exile in the Netherlands while Dante defected to the side of the Philippine government.¹⁸ During Sison's imprisonment and subsequent exile, disagreements surfaced among other communist insurgents as to the future course of the revolution. Around 1990 the movement split into two groups. "The Reaffirmists" supported Sison's ideas of the people's war in the countryside. "The Rejectionists" rejected the Reaffirmist strategy and called for unhindered war in the cities.¹⁹ The Rejectionist strategy of using the NPA to attack the cities became a liability to the communist movement. During NPA operations on the island of Negros in 1997, cities were openly attacked by the insurgents. However, the NPA was not ready to defend against counter-attacks and were routed by the AFP in force-on-force engagements.²⁰ This strategy ostensibly ignores force and time as factors in war. A smaller insurgent force must avoid large-scale force-on-force encounters to the greatest extent possible. This enables the insurgent army to survive and, over time, build greater support and force structure for ensuing battles. Mao Tse Tung refers to this concept as the "strategic retreat." He says,

"The strategic retreat is a planned strategic step taken by an inferior **force** for the purpose of conserving its strength and biding its **time** to defeat the enemy, when it finds itself confronted with a superior **force** whose offensive it is unable to smash quickly."²¹
(emphasis added)

Clearly, the Reaffirmists seem cognizant of the force concerns of a guerilla insurgency and the positive effects that can be realized over time. The Rejectionists' concept, on the other hand, may only result in more rapid extermination of the NPA by the AFP.

In December 1976, the MNLF and the Philippine government signed the Tripoli Agreement that granted a level of autonomy to Muslim provinces in the south. Initially, both the MNLF, led by Nur Misuari, and the MILF, led by Salamat Hashim, agreed to

abide by the terms of the Tripoli Agreement.²² However, after the Philippine government sought to change the agreement to allow for Islamic rule of approximately half of the provinces, the MNLF and MILF split. The MNLF was willing to accept the new offer from Manila while the MILF demanded strict adherence to the agreement's original terms.²³ The MILF called for a "jihad" against Christian Filipinos and the Manila government. Ultimately, Misuari gained governorship of the autonomous provinces (ARMM) while Hashim receded into the safe haven of his MILF strongholds. While the MNLF has somewhat "legitimized" itself, the MILF has continued to wage a guerilla war against the government.²⁴ The situation is even further confused by the emergence of the Abu Sayyaf. This group is said to be the terrorist arm of the MNLF and has become the primary target of the Philippines' most recent anti-terrorist operations.²⁵

As in the case of the communists, we see how the splintering of the movement weakens the overall cause. The MNLF has traditionally been more secular in its ideas about an independent Muslim state. The MILF follows the more fundamentalist view of Islam and would likely carry that over to an independent Mindanao.²⁶ Incidentally, many of the MILF's operatives are said to have been trained in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan during the 1990's.²⁷ These fissures in the Muslim movement illustrate again how force can be degraded in an insurgency when factions disagree over strategic objectives and the tactics used to attain them. If these various Islamic "fronts" set aside their differences, they may amass a force that could seriously challenge Philippine rule of Mindanao. A concentrated effort, following Mao's model, may enable the Moros to use time and space to their advantage. If attempted, a unified effort to gain popular support in the south may

eventually empower the insurgents to repulse government forces. As it stands now, this division of the Moro insurgents can only hamper their ability to wage an effective war against the AFP.

Similarity: Terrorism

Terrorist tactics have been a part of both the communist and Moro insurgencies in the Philippines. The communists have used terror tactics throughout their struggle. The Huks, as early as 1945-46, used their guerilla force in Luzon to intimidate civilians who favored the Manila government, murdered local landlords to reclaim land, and conducted robberies and kidnappings to raise funds to support their cause.²⁸ Later, the CPP and NPA carried on the legacy. One of the contributing factors to Ferdinand Marcos' declaration of martial law in 1971 was the NPA's connection with the Playa Miranda bombing that took place in August of that same year.²⁹ Years after the bombing, NPA defectors admitted that Sison had, in fact, directed the bombing that killed nine people and wounded a number of opposition political candidates.³⁰ Even today the NPA carries on terrorist attacks against military and civilian targets. In the spring of 1999 peace talks between the government and the National Democratic Front (the latest mutation of the CPP) were suspended when the NPA kidnapped two Philippine military officers. Talks only resumed after the officers were released.³¹ On December 26, 2001, NPA guerillas killed the mayor of a small town in the northern Philippines despite a supposed truce called by the NPA earlier in the month.³²

The Moro movement has also used terror as a tool in its struggle. The United States is currently deploying Special Operations Forces (SOF) to the Republic of the

Philippines. This action is a branch to the ongoing war on terrorism. These forces will help train Philippine military and law enforcement personnel in the art and science of dealing with terrorists.³³ The target of the American-Filipino coalition is the MNLF splinter group, Abu-Sayyaf. The Abu Sayyaf is currently holding two Americans hostage on the island of Basilan while the group tries to negotiate a ransom.³⁴ There are reports that in the regions controlled by the MILF, churches, markets, and homes are pillaged regularly in an attempt to extort money from local inhabitants.³⁵ As recently as December 29, 2001, Muslim rebels attacked a Christian village in the southern Philippines and killed ten of its inhabitants.³⁶

It is not uncommon for an insurgent force to use terror as a means to compensate for a lack of forces. An insurgent force that does not have the inherent capability to defeat its adversary by conventional means can use terror tactics as a temporary substitute for that lack of force. Professor John Waghelstein of the U.S. Naval War College explains in a lecture on Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW) that terrorists do not necessarily carry out attacks against their armed enemy, but will often conduct an attack on another target. In this type of attack, the real objective is to influence or impress a group of people. In theory, the population then sees how truly capable and dangerous the terrorist group can be. This then elicits some form of response from the government.³⁷ Trouble arises for the insurgents when their terror tactics backfire. Current terrorist attacks in the Philippines have motivated the United States to deploy SOF to the Philippines to assist the government.³⁸ For an insurgent, this type of reaction from an opponent, or the opponent's allies, only exacerbates the insurgents' force ratio

dilemma. Although the insurgent has tried to make up for a force shortfall with the use of terror, he has, in reality, created a worse situation.

The Counter-Argument: Ideology and Objectives

Ideology and objectives are probably the most obvious and pertinent differences between the communist and Muslim insurgencies in the Philippines. There seems little point in restating either the communist or Islamic ideologies in this forum. What seems more relevant is how the ideology and objectives of each movement relates to the factors of space, force, and time.

In the case of the Philippine communists, the plan has been to gain control of a space that encompasses the entire landmass of the Philippines. Like most communist insurgencies of the twentieth century, the Philippine communists have focused on complete overthrow of the existing government and institution of a communist/socialist structure in its place. The communist ideology leaves no room for non-communist parties/organizations to function within the state. The space must be completely conquered by the insurgent force. The insurgents must convince the masses that life will be better under communism. Once convinced of this, a local population provides support for the cause. If the government intervenes and is able to improve life for a local population, then the communists may lose support in that area, e.g., Ramon Magsaysay's reform policies of the 1950's.³⁹ Ultimately, the government must offer the people a "better deal" than the communists or put another way -- "out-reform" the revolutionaries.

Additionally, in the case of the Philippine communist movement the sheer size of the space to be controlled is daunting. In a nation that is essentially an archipelago the Maoist model seems to have both advantages and disadvantages. Utilizing the natural barriers of the sea, mountains, and jungle, the NPA, even in its currently weakened state, has been able to continue operating in remote parts of Mindanao, the Negros Islands, Quezon Province, and the Cordillera and Bicol regions of Luzon.⁴⁰ The trouble in this case is that the same spatial factors that limit the counterinsurgents also limit the communists themselves.

The Moros are conducting a religiously and ethnically-based insurgency in the Philippines. This type of insurgency has a built-in support base. The Moros are an ethnic group bound together by Islam. As Lawrence Cline points out, "the Moro insurgents have received considerable popular support from the Filipino Muslim populace."⁴¹ He goes on to say that the support is not universal, but estimates that about 55 % of the Muslims support the cause.⁴² Salamat Hashim, leader of the MILF, has structured the objectives of his organization so that they might appeal to the widest audience of Moro people.

1. To make supreme the word of Allah.
2. To gain the pleasure of Allah.
3. To strengthen the relationship of man with his Creator.
4. To strengthen the relationship of man and man.
5. To regain the illegally and immorally usurped legitimate and inalienable rights of the Bangsamoro people to freedom and self-determination.
6. To establish an independent state and government and implement Shari'ah (Islamic Law).⁴³

Ethno-religious ties will, more often than not, override political ones. By the creation of ARMM, it seems that the Philippine government has been more willing to compromise

with the Moros than they have with the communists. Most likely this comes from a realization that they, the government, will never be able to fully quell the Moro independence movement. Its history is too old and its roots are too deep.

The Moros are struggling for a much smaller landmass than the communists. Despite some of the settlements made by the MNLF and its split with the MILF, the rebels' overriding objective has been an independent Islamic state on Mindanao and its adjacent islands in the south.⁴⁴ This area is what Hashim refers to as the "Bangsamoro homeland."⁴⁵ A smaller space allows an insurgent force to become more familiar with the terrain, climate, sea conditions, etc., of its operating area. This can make it more effective than an insurgent force that is trying to conquer a large landmass. Although the Moros have attempted to create "pockets of resistance" similar to those of the NPA's communist model, it appears that they have not made any significant attempts to expand their area of control outside Mindanao and her adjacent islands.

Rebuttal to the Counter-Argument: The Economic Factor

The CPP was founded because its leaders felt that there was an unfair distribution of wealth in the country and that in Philippine society the common man did not have the same rights and privileges as those in the upper classes. Sison said, in reference to Philippine socio-economics, that,

"...the system of production is dominated by the combination of the comprador big bourgeoisie and the landlord class, which together with U.S. monopoly capitalism, prevent Philippine industrialization and allow the persistence of feudal and semi-feudal forms of exploitation."⁴⁶

Comments like this, similar to the rhetoric of other communist movements, lead one to believe that although political ideology is the primary reason given for the insurgency, economics comes in a strong second.

The Moro movement too contains economic issues. In the five provinces where the majority of Muslims reside, 83 % of all families live below the poverty line of \$2,000 per year in pesos.⁴⁷ Filipino Muslims, in general, have a lower per capita income than that of their Christian countrymen.⁴⁸ Although the leaders of the Moro movement cite Islam as the impetus for their revolution, the common Muslim might be just as interested in economic reform. The creation of ARMM has had a pacifying effect on leaders of the MNLF, many of whom have received financial compensation for their cooperation with the government.⁴⁹ It is possible that further economic aid to the Moro communities could have a similar effect on the remainder of the population. Those Muslims content with economic conditions under the existing government may be less likely to join or support an insurgent movement.

The issue of ideology is a significant difference between the two insurgencies studied in this paper. However, it can be argued that the economic factor can sometimes overshadow ideology in a revolutionary struggle. Opponents of an insurgency can exploit this economic factor. The Philippine government by improving economic conditions for its people can undercut the support base of the insurgents. Actions such as these reduce the space in which insurgents can operate and greatly hamper their ability to increase force structure. As Orlando Ambrocio states in his essay on Philippine

insurgency, the military can address "the insurgency organism," but only government reform can address "the breeding ground" of insurgency.⁵⁰

Conclusion

This paper has focused on the similarities and differences in two of the Philippines' ongoing insurgencies. Each one has its own root causes and ideologies. One is a holdover of the twentieth century communist revolutions, while the other is an ethno-religiously based revolution that may be more common in the early twenty-first century. On the surface these conflicts seem different. However, when analyzed in relation to the factors of operational warfare, it appears they are more alike than different. Use of the Maoist model, internal divisions in the movements, terror tactics, and desire for economic reform are all characteristics common to both insurgencies. Although every insurgency is unique, and no real template exists that applies to all, military planners may still be able to take some lessons learned from past insurgencies and apply them to counterinsurgency efforts in the future.

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- ⁴⁷ Kirk, 128-9.
- ⁴⁸ Cline, 116.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid., 130.
- ⁵⁰ Ambrocio, 39.

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